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How Philosophers Argue: An Adversarial Collaboration on the Russell-Copleston Debate
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Review

How Philosophers Argue: An Adversarial Collaboration on the Russell-Copleston Debate

By Fernando Leal and Hubert Marraud

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Abstract: This article reviews Fernando Leal and Hubert Marraud's *How Philosophers Argue: An Adversarial Collaboration on the Russell-Copleston Debate* (Springer 2022).

Résumé: Cet article est une critique de *How Philosophers Argue: An Adversarial Collaboration on the Russell-Copleston Debate* (Springer 2018) de Fernando Leal and Hubert Marraud.

Keywords: Russell, Copleston, the existence of God, pragma-dialectics, argument dialectics, theories of argumentation

Introductory philosophy courses frequently include the famous Russell-Copleston Debate on the existence of God (the 'R-C Debate'). It usefully introduces students to arguments about God, and to related questions about metaphysics, ontology, the grounds for morality, and even logic. Anyone who includes the debate on their syllabus would do well to use the impressive book, *How Philosophers Argue: An Adversarial Collaboration on the Russell-Copleston Debate*, as a guide to class discussion. (I say 'guide' because this is a book for philosophy professors, not a text for introductory philosophy students.)

The book's account of the debate is clear, meticulous, and thorough. It provides a remarkably detailed account of the circumstances of the debate (and the participants) and includes two finely tuned accounts of the argumentation it contains. The debate itself is published in the book both as an appendix and in the commentaries by the authors. The discussion in the latter submits every remark in the debate to reflection and discussion.

The commentaries provide an insightful account of the many issues the debate raises. In the process, they tie questions about God's existence to many more subtle matters, for example, the nature of analytic, necessary, contingent, and tautological propositions and beings. Especially in Leal's commentary, pertinent asides discuss the views of philosophers like Aristotle, Leibniz, Whitehead, Kripke, etc.; recent argumentation authors; "modern" logicians; and literary and scientific figures. Some minor shortcomings (the lack of an index and a need for more copy-editing) are sometimes evident, but they are minor flaws and do not preclude welcoming a discussion that is a major contribution to scholarship on the R-C Debate.

As significant as the book is in this regard, it would be a mistake to think of it as an attempt to decide who won the R-C Debate or the final answers to the philosophical questions and issues the debate raises. The commentaries on the debate are fulsome, but the ultimate focus is not the debate but an attempt to use it to illustrate, compare, contrast, and explore two different approaches to the analysis of argumentation. The R-C Debate was chosen as an example for many good reasons, most notably because the authors want to analyze something more involved than the standard one or two paragraph examples that are (for practical reasons) usually considered in logic and argumentation theory.

As the introduction to the book explains, its commentaries are intended to be 'adversarial collaboration'—a research method developed in the social sciences. At its core, it is a joint collaboration by two researchers who apply different methodological approaches to the same subject. In this case, the methodologies are two different approaches to the analysis of argumentation. The subject analyzed is the R-C Debate. Like other adversarial collaborators, Leal and Marraud aim to shed

light on the contrary approaches they use in a way that explores the questions whether and how they might be reconciled (spoiler alert: in this book, the two theoretical perspectives are not reconciled though there may, as Marraud suggests at one point, be ways to make them complementary).

The discussion of argumentation theory that grounds the exercise is founded on distinctions between different theories of argumentation. 'A-theories' view and process argumentation as argument in a manner common in the teaching and study of informal logic. The authors quote Ralph Johnson in this regard, highlighting his suggestion that we must analyze real-life argumentation by identifying and isolating the arguments a set of sentences contains. This must be accomplished by removing the 'clutter' that obscures the inference relationships that connect them. The clutter that is removed typically includes unnecessary (or irrelevant) digressions, interjections, asides, jokes, expressions of emotion, and other elements that have, on the face of it, nothing to do with the logic of the argument identified.

The authors contrast A-theories with 'D-theories'—theories that pay attention to the way in which arguments are delivered. The most obvious example is rhetoric, which studies elements of argument delivery that may make arguments more or less persuasive, even when these elements do not contribute to (and possibly detract from) the logical strength of an argument. Leal and Marraud contrast A-theories and D-theories. As they note in this regard, "the tendency of A-theorists is to consider rhetorical devices… to be either pure clutter or at best an annoying obstacle that needs overcoming in order to zoom in on the true content of the argument" (p. 33).

D-theories broaden the scope of argument analysis. 'E-theories' broaden it further, understanding argumentation as an exchange of arguments that occurs when arguers (implicitly or explicitly) argue with one another, propounding different (and opposing) points of view. According to E-theorists, we must judge arguers and/or their arguments by considering their relationship to other arguers and arguments. It is in this regard worth noting that Johnson, the arch A-theorist, moves in this direction in his account of an argument's 'dialectical tier' and its

implications for argument construction and assessment (see Johnson 2019).

'P-theories' are defined as theories that focus on the argumentation process. Pragma-dialectics is the most obvious contemporary example. It considers a series of four stages (confrontation, opening, argumentation, and concluding stages) that are included in a successful critical discussion. Leal illustrates the nuances of the P-theory approach by choosing Pragma-dialectics as the theory that informs his commentary on the R-C Debate. For the most part, this works well, though his variant of Pragma-dialectics is a variant that highlights some unique (some would say, peculiar) features of the ways that philosophers argue.

In a philosophical exchange, the opening stage of a critical discussion in which substantive and procedural starting points are established is expanded so that these starting points can be refashioned at any point in the subsequent discussion. As Leal shows, this kind of alteration is a recurrent feature of Russell's and Copleston's remarks in the R-C debate. It reflects the extent to which philosophers are willing to question anything and everything. As Leal puts it "In contradistinction to *any other* discussion that can take place among human beings, philosophical discussions have the peculiar feature that, in them, *anything can be questioned*" (p. 74).

To some extent (but not entirely), Leal alleviates the issues that this raises by emphasizing the role that questions play in philosophy: "when we deal with philosophers, the very first thing that we must listen to, before we attend to their arguments is the questions that intrigue and oppress them, those they are laboriously trying to answer" (p. 53). In the case of the R-C Debate, these questions are not limited to the obvious questions that prompt the debate ('Does God exist?' 'Can this be proven?'). Leal identifies a list of ninety-eight questions that the debate raises in some way. In the process, he makes the identification of questions (and an 'erotetic' perspective) a central element of the way that philosophers argue.

This approach is the basis of an impressive analysis of the R-D Debate, but it isn't clear that it makes Pragma-dialectics the best model to use when analyzing arguments between philosophers. For the goal of

a critical discussion is the resolution of disagreement, and there is little of that in this book. Considered from the point of view of philosophy and the status of its arguments, this is not a minor matter, Leal himself saying that, "…the situation in philosophy is special if not indeed paradoxical: philosophical discussions never seem to end; agreement among philosophers seldom occurs; and, when it does, it tends to be short-lived and extend itself to just a few issues" (p. 73). Though Leal's use of Pragma-dialectics does produce helpful commentary on the R-C Debate, the lack of decisive concluding stages in philosophical exchange makes one wonder whether it is the best way to model "How Philosophers Argue."

This issue is less prominent in Marraud's analysis, which heads in a different direction, offering an E-theoretical account of the R-C Debate. From the point of view of argumentation theory, his approach is a novel one that merits some discussion. It is founded on a distinction between 'arguer dialectics' and 'argument dialectics.' In the former case, E-theories provide rules and conventions that are used to judge and regulate the behaviour of arguers in a dialogue. This is a familiar enough approach to the analysis of argumentation (in, for example, Pragma-dialectic's rules for critical discussion).

Argument dialectics offers a less familiar approach to argument analysis. It focuses not on the behaviour of arguers but on the assessment of the series of arguments they produce: "What I want to stress… is that whenever in a dialogue anyone offers an argument for consideration, she does so by connecting it, more or less explicitly, with prior arguments" (p. 288). When we evaluate the strength of the argument in question, it is its connections to these prior arguments that are stressed and assessed when one practices argument dialectics.

As Marraud points out, one might compare Habermas' (1984) view of argumentation, noting that he—unlike most practitioners of formal and informal logic—"assigns to logic not only the study of the internal structure of arguments but also the study of their interrelations, so that argument dialectics becomes a part of logic" (p. 287). According to this way of looking at things, logic, as it is classically conceived, fo-

cuses on individual arguments and the 'intra-argumentative' relationships that they contain. In contrast, argument dialectics focuses on 'macro-arguments,' which consist of two or more connected arguments and the 'inter-argumentative' relations that connect them.

Within Marraud's account of argument dialectics, an 'argumentative operation' is "a process by which two or more arguments are integrated into a single, more complex argument" (p. 297). In a number of ways, one might compare and contrast operations within classical logic, which emphasizes processes in which two or more statements ('propositions') are integrated in a way that produces an individual argument. In a series of short chapters, Marruad outlines ways in which the argumentative operations that argument dialectics requires are accomplished by 'concatenation,' appeals to warrants and backings, comparisons with analogous arguments, the production of counter arguments, dismissals, rebuttals, and so on.

This book's account of argument dialectics convincingly expands the scope of classical logic, broadening it to make room for a much richer collection of logical operators and operations. At the same time, Marraud's account raises many questions that need more investigation and discussion. Three topics that merit more elaboration are (1) the interpretation of macro-arguments (which can, even more than individual arguments, be interpreted in different ways); (2) the ways in which we should assign evidential weight to whole arguments (rather than propositions); and (3) the possibility that macro-arguments might, in many cases, be reducible to a series of arguments in the classical sense, not requiring a radically new logic.

When one analyzes an argumentative exchange, argument dialectics suggests that we understand it as an attempt to interactively create a macro-argument relevant to whatever issue is in question. Marraud illustrates this in the case of the R-C Debate. The difference between this and Leal's commentary creates the 'adversarial' opposition that is the subject of this book when it is considered from the point of view of argumentation theory. One of the key questions this raises is the extent to which the difference between Leal's Pragma-dialectics and Marraud's argument dialectics can be bridged. A more basic question

raised is how we should understand the relationship between their points of view and the A-theories that they treat as a foil in their discussion of theories of argumentation.

My own impression is that the discussion of argumentation theories in this book exaggerates the differences between the various theories they discuss. Consider Marraud's comment that "Logic, either formal or informal, and argument dialectics are not two distinct disciplines with different subject matters. They are two competing, and even antithetical, conceptions of the standards and criteria for good and bad argumentation" (p. 294). In his commentary at the end of the book Marraud elaborates on this suggestion, contrasting the traditional view of argument—which suggests that "the logical properties of an argument are completely determined by the properties of its parts and the relationships among them" (p. 442)—with his own argument dialectical approach, which makes these logical properties "also dependent on contextual elements that are not part of the argument" (p. 442).

This is an important philosophical difference, but the clash of argumentation theories—and A, D, and P theories—it suggests can be seen in a different way. When we consider actual instances of argumentation, informal logic is the paradigm A-theory. It does focus on the analysis of individual arguments, but it would be a mistake to think that this means that it denies or ignores the significance of contextual and dialectical considerations. I don't think that any informal logician denies that individual arguments need to be analyzed and assessed in a way that considers their connection to other arguments. At the very least, this must be done by considering other arguments that establish the truth and validity (or falsity and invalidity) of the premises and inferences in whatever argument is in question. In practice, this inexorably pushes arguers (and the analysis of arguments) beyond the internal properties of that argument, toward much broader discussion and exchange. The recognition that this is an element of argumentation is reflected in the analysis of arguments which is included in almost every informal logic text and course.

One might plausibly argue that informal logic does not pay *enough* attention to dialectical considerations in its theoretical deliberations.

Assuming this is so, it does not show that informal logic and argument dialectics offer 'antithetical' approaches to argumentation. One might instead conclude that the scope of informal logic (and the scope of A-theories) needs to be adjusted and expanded in a way that more explicitly acknowledges dialectical considerations—in particular, in a way that embraces a commitment to consider arguments that defend opposing points of view. This is Johnson's point in his account of the dialectical tier. What is at issue is not whether we should give up on A-theories, but whether their dialectical aspects should be better acknowledged and expanded further.

The expansion of A-theories in this direction can be done in a way that incorporates both Leal's arguer dialectics and Marraud's argument dialectics. They focus on different ends of argumentation (one on the arguer, the other on the arguments they produce), but that does not show that they entail contradictory assessments of particular acts of arguing. If arguers follow ideal rules of engagement in an exchange, shouldn't their arguing take them to those conclusions that are most defensible from a logical point of view? If this is not the case, doesn't it show that something is missing from the proposed rules of engagement? And couldn't the posing of questions, the clarification of starting points, etc. that arguer dialectics requires contribute to attempts to determine what is logical from an argument dialectical point of view? In the course of arguing, don't these aspects of arguer dialectics encourage arguers to weigh the strength of competing arguments for different conclusions, construct macro arguments, and consider argumentative operations? In A-theories, moves in this direction are already implicit in instances of standard schemes of argument—in, for example, the study and assessment of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments and appeals to analogous arguments.

These kinds of ruminations point in the direction of a general theory of argumentation that incorporates A-theories (and D-theories) and the kinds of analysis and considerations Leal and Marraud emphasize in their contributions to this book. One might argue that a move in this direction is what characterizes the growth and development of argumentation theory today.

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In opposition to this evolution, one might wonder whether the broad expansion of argumentation theory it suggests strays too far from the Johnsonian A-theory that Leal and Marraud reject. Leal in particular is determined to expand argumentation theory to account for every aspect of argumentative exchange, emphasizing that "we have to consider the argumentation process as it actually takes place, *in its entirety*" (p. 38). In his discussion of the R-C Debate, this leads Leal to the anti-Johnsonian A-theory conclusion that "in the present context there cannot be any utterance or part of an utterance that may be characterized as clutter to be eliminated in order to get at what is being done" (p. 90).

This is a radical suggestion, claiming as it does, that *nothing* in an argumentation dialogue is clutter, and that *everything* in it is relevant to its analysis and assessment. In keeping with this idea, Leal attempts to consider all the elements of the R-C Debate, but it is not clear that he achieves his own ideal. Notably, the R-C Debate is an oral exchange that consists of spoken arguments, and this has implications for any attempt to account for every aspect of the debate. This is not a minor matter in oral argument, where auditory cues are an important determinant of meaning. Someone's tone of voice can, for example, turn an affirmation into a negation or indicate that some claim is a hypothesis or exploratory comment rather than a statement. In other cases, the way that something is said (hesitatingly, loudly, softly, etc.) conveys certainty and conviction or uncertainty and doubt (in a way that language users immediately recognize).

I am not claiming that a consideration of the auditory elements of the R-C Debate would profoundly change our understanding of it. It might, or it might not. My point is that ignoring them suggests that there *is* clutter that Leal has discarded in his analysis. More deeply, one might question whether it is a mistake to think that there is no clutter that we should discard when we analyze and assess argumentation. It might, with some plausibility, be argued that Johnson is right when he suggests that argumentation is often characterized by irrelevant digressions, interjections, asides, jokes, expressions of emotion, etc. and that the first step in argumentation analysis should be identifying and removing clutter that obscures an argument.

I will end this review by recommending this book as the work of two scholars who have impressively deep understanding of informal logic and argumentation theory. There is much to be learned from their discussions—both of the R-C Debate and of argumentation theory. Hopefully these discussions will continue in a way that blends their and other approaches to the analysis of argumentation and applies them (adversarially or not) to significant cases of arguing. I think it would be especially interesting to analyze an extended example of argumentation (philosophical or otherwise) that results in the *resolution* of significant disagreement. Doing so could demonstrate the importance of argumentation theory and its ability to make arguing a positive force that promotes careful reflection and significant conclusions.

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